

# DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND ITS EXPRESSION



Isma'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī

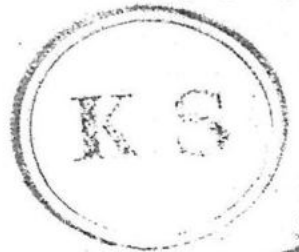
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Temple University

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## DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND ITS EXPRESSION

### I. Geneses and Early Development of the Idea of Divine Transcendence

The earliest "logos" doctrine on record is that propounded by Memphite theology.<sup>1</sup> It states that the God Ptah thought in his heart everything in creation and then uttered his thought. The act of utterance, of expression of inner thought into outer words, is the creative act which brought about the real existence of everything. Expression in words was a creative materialization of things, including creation of the order gods. The genesis of the world and of everything in it was a progress from divine thought to divine word, and "every divine word came into being through that which was thought by the heart and commanded by the tongue."<sup>2</sup> Conforming with long-standing Egyptian religious wisdom, Memphite theology did see Ptah as the power in all things. His thinking and commanding were not only the origin of the existence of everything, but equally, its sustenance and source of life, growth and energy. This notwithstanding, it was opposed—and hence, was not popular and did not survive—because it saw God as in some aspect prior to his creation. In other words, Memphite theology was rejected because of the grain of transcendence it contained. Somehow, it removed God from His creatures though He continued to act in them. The Egyptian wanted to see God in the creature, not beyond it. God, in his view, lived in nature. The ancient Egyptian was repulsed by any suggestion that removed him from God's proximity. That is why he regarded God's hierophany in nature as constitutive. He did not have to think God: he perceived him immediately in the phenomena of nature. Wherever he turned, he could tell himself, *Voilà* God. With this given-ness of God, the Egyptian mind could afford to be abstract about God's character. Amon-Re was characterless, unknown. "No gods know his true shape . . . No witness is borne to him. He is too mysterious for his glory to be revealed, too great for questions to be asked of him, too powerful to be known."<sup>3</sup> This enabled the Egyptian to regard God's character as genuinely numinous, i.e., as mysterious and unknowable. He beheld, rather than thought, God; and he knew Him, the God, rather than His character.

The conception of God differed radically in Mesopotamia. There, the tradition has long established God as prior to His creation. As its creator and fashioner, He stood as it were beyond it, prior to it, ontologically as well as in His efficacious animation of it. The Mesopotamian saw God in the phenomena of nature; but unlike the Egyptian, he saw the hierophany only as the occasional appearance of



the God not as constitutive. Nature was for him a carrier—one could almost say an expression—of divine power, never identified with it *e.g.* Inanna and her reed, Enlil and his storm, etc. The god or goddess was never either reed or storm, though all reeds and all storms were hierophanies of them. Equally, each god has his own domain beyond which he never went. Nonetheless, his realm was never exhaustively equated with him. His divine being was different and separate from the natural phenomenon though inextricably associated with it.

Both the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian felt themselves surrounded by God on every side because nature surrounded them. However, whereas the Egyptian *perceived* the divine presence *immediately* in nature, the Mesopotamian *deduced* the divine presence *mediately* from nature, i.e., he saw the natural phenomenon as an index which he related to the divine by an act of thought. For the Egyptian, God was *in* and *of* nature, logically equivalent to, or convertible with it, and nature was ontologically constitutive of divinity. For the Mesopotamian, God was *in* but never equivalent to or convertible with it. Abolish nature from reality: To the Egyptian, you have abolished God; to the Mesopotamian, you have made His effects imperceptible but never touched God.

The will or command of God was for the Egyptian legible in nature, just as divine nature was immediately perceivable. This is why morality was taken to be the science of nature, and its norms were called "the teachings." For the first time, moral investigation absolutely coincided with scientific investigation. The "command of God" was itself the phenomenon of nature. Nature was diversity; but its diversity was merely God's idiom of expression. It was varied, while Divine nature was one and the same, an underlying unity. Since this was not the case of the Mesopotamian, he sought to understand God by characterizing Him as well as he could through observation of God's effects. Such characterizations naturally arranged themselves into groups, and produced in due course a pantheon of different characters, each of which was perceived as possessing a different set of attributes or characteristics. Marduk, the greatest, the god of the gods, had fifty names, all characteristics of him, and he could be worshipped by the recitation of those names. Other gods had lesser characteristics. Evidently, the characterizations of the god which have been collected after observing the god's acts in nature, and were subsequently built up into a divine personality, replace the immediately-given phenomena of nature in Egypt. Abstracting the characterizations from nature is the work of thought; building them up into a personality is the work of the imagination.



The Apollonian revolution in Greece which built out of the rites of fertility and appeasement a pantheon of gods and goddesses in dramatic interaction with one another, was little more besides such work of the imagination. Its poeticality consisted of an idealization component which differentiated it from the empirical generalizations of science. Idealization is the rearrangement and intensification of the characteristics observed in the hierophanic phenomena of nature. In both Mesopotamia and Greece, divine transcendence consists, first, in abstraction from natural phenomena, i.e., in regarding God as prior to nature; and third, in enabling the imagination to perceive him through such character-reading. In Greece, an additional step was taken to intensify and re-arrange the characterizations, to harmonize or juxtapose them in different gods. Greece had remained closer to Egypt than to Mesopotamia by subjecting its idealization of the gods to nature. The Apollonian myth-makers have followed nature rather closely in their idealization. In consequence, their gods turned out to be personifications of the elements of nature raised to the  $n$  degree and rearranged so as to expose their natural individuation.

In contrast, Mesopotamia idealized in the opposite direction. Concerned with divinity's ontological difference from the priority to nature, its idealization (i.e., intensification and re-arrangement) pressed away from nature. In consequence, their gods turned out to be transcending the hierophanic elements of nature and tending towards total otherness from nature. The imagination had to work here harder than in Greece, precisely because of this intensified stance from nature. The phenomena of nature lost not only the constitutive capacity they enjoyed in Egypt, but equally their capacity as indices of divinity. They became props for the imagination which carried most of the burden of perception of the divine. As a prop for the imagination, the phenomenon or element of nature enjoys a suggestive capacity whose purity is directly proportional to the transcendentalizing of the god in question. In the case of Marduk, god of Babylon, the Semitic transcendentalizing effort reached its pre-Abrahamic apogee as far as historical records give us reason to determine. The gods associated with nature have become, in the Akkadian epic of creation, *Enuma elish*, mere executives, attendants or regional governors for Marduk, the god of gods, who was elected to this post by the primordial assembly of the gods.<sup>4</sup> Marduk has no association with any specific element of nature. He is the creator of all and hence associable only with the "whole" of creation. His characterization is the richest of all the gods: "By his fifty names he shall be praised." He is the absolute ruler: In his hand is the "tablet of destinies." His will is the law of heaven and earth; Hammurabi as well as other earthly kings are only executors of the

law. They may reward the obedient and punish the violators; but ultimate justification and condemnation belong to Marduk alone.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Divine Transcendence in Pre-Islām

### A. Mesopotamia and Arabia

Religion in the Near East has always been associated with the state. Indeed, religion always provided the state's *raison d'être*. This feature of the religious life is due to the fact that all Near Eastern religion is life-affirming and world-oriented. It means to make or remake history, to remould so as to perfect nature and enable man to maximize his usufruct of it. This connection with history has been the source of corruption in religion. Human life with all its passions, differentiations and motives, its thousand-and-one relativities, is a constant temptation to alter the religion to suit the person, or particular group concerned. Hence, religion has been oscillating between purity and corruption, a stage in which the voice of prophethood speaks in clear terms what God commands and another stage in which the voices of the concerned interpret or tamper with the earlier revelation to advance their cause.

The ancient states in Mesopotamia and Diyār al Shām (Greater Syria) rose and fell in quick succession. It was natural that the canons, definitions and imperatives of religion would also vary despite the permanent substrate of principles common to all. But especially since the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., when the territory began to be invaded by non-Semites from the north, northeast and northwest who belonged to a radically different world view, the pull towards a closer association of divinity with nature increased. The gods' names, genders and the natural elements constitutive of their hierophanies rotated among them, but the interest in them as divinities persisted throughout, despite the change. The cities and villages of Canaan and Phoenicia, for instance, found religious satisfaction in worshipping deities (El, Ba'al, Yamm, Mot, Ashtar, Eshmun, Milkom, Milqart, etc.) which were closely associated with natural phenomena, especially those of fertility. However, they were interested in these deities as generic divine powers rather than individuals—thus reverting to a situation resembling Egypt. They showed their faithfulness to the transcendent god by recognizing, in addition to the particular gods, Ba'al, the Lord of Heaven, the Mighty Lord of all the holy gods. In Arabia, for another example, the masses found religious satisfaction with the tribal deities which pre-Islāmic Arabic literature has brought to us; but they added to these, two other levels of divinities: the gods and goddesses of Makkah, and above these, Allah, the Lord and Creator of all, Who



never had an image, any tribal connection or hierophanic association.

In Arabia, another fact imposes itself upon us. That is the presence of the *hanīfs* whom tradition has described as strict monotheists, who rejected Arab polytheism, maintained a life of purity and righteousness, and rose above tribal loyalties. The *hanīfs* were regarded by their fellows with respect, and they were known for their religious wisdom and familiarity with the religious traditions of other Near Easterners. Evidently, the *hanīfs* were the carriers of the best in the Semitic tradition. They kept up the notion of transcendence entertained by its ancient adherents and prophets; and, it would seem, even further developed it. Their rejection of tribal and Makkan gods and their abhorrence of their images marks them as transcendentalists of first calibre. They must be the media by which the Semitic tradition of transcendence had transmitted and perpetuated itself.

### B. The Hebrews and Their Descendants

Biblical scholars are agreed that before the Exile, there is no evidence that the god the Hebrews worshipped was transcendent. The evidence surviving all edition of the Biblical text is overwhelming. So many passages speak of God in the plural from "Elohim" that a source-text is assumed to have been incorporated into the scripture in which God was indeed plural. These Elohim intermarried with the daughters of men and produced offspring (Genesis 6:2, 4). In another passage, God is referred to as a ghost which Jacob beheld "face to face," wrestled with and nearly defeated (Genesis 32:24–30). In a third passage (Genesis 31:30–36), Laban, the Hebrew, possessed gods which Jacob (the heir of God's covenant with Abraham and his grandson) stole and which Leah, his wife, hid under her skirts when their owner burst into her tent looking for them. The Hebrew king is declared to be the "son of God" (Psalms 2:7; 89:26; II Samuel 7:14; I Chronicles 17:13, etc.), and the Hebrews "the sons of God" in a real sense (Hoseah 1:10; Isaiah 9:6; 63:14–16; etc. The conclusion is inevitable that the Hebrew mind at that age did indeed strike a geneological connection between the people and "their" god which does not become invalid even by their "a-whoring" after other gods (Hosea 2:2–13). In Deuteronomy 9:5–6, we read that God grants favors to "His People" and He is bound by His promise ever to favor them. Evidently such a god was not the transcendent God known later.

That the Hebrews were content to have a non-transcendent god, is attested by the fact that as far back as their self-consciousness goes—and hence their history—the Hebrews were to some measure ethnocentrist. This particularism may have well been expressed by their notion of God as "their father" of themselves as "His chosen and



elect.” Consequently, the nature of such a deity had to be conceived in non-transcendentalist terms.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to this view, Biblical scholars point out that the Exile witnessed a great jump toward transcendence. They explain that this development was prompted by three influences. First, under the pressure for self-reexamination that crushing defeat brings, the Hebrews might have heard and listened to a pure transcendentalist view of divinity taught by the *ḥanīfs* of Mesopotamia. Second, they may have listened to the popular transcendentalist views of the Semitic Mesopotamian and Syrian masses as well as the adherents and advocates of Zoroastrian religion. Third, their status as an element in a new world-order about to be born through the agency of a *goy* king (Cyrus) and a *goyim* people (the Persians), might have caused them to widen the jurisdiction—and hence, the nature—of the father-god. These influences may have caused Deutero-Isaiah to reform the old Hebrew notion of God.<sup>7</sup>

Under the influences of Christianity and Islām which continue to the present day, Judaism made further strides towards divine transcendence. The rabbis of Palestine and Iraq in the early Christian centuries of the Muslim World, especially Spain, North Africa and Egypt, have written treatises in which God is as transcendent as the best Christian and Islāmic legacy has conceived Him to be. In this regard, the writings of Mūsā ibn Maymūn, Moses Mendelssohn, Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Kammūnah, and Ibn Zakariyyā stand out among the best mankind has produced. In the contemporary scene, Abraham Heschel, Leopold Aunz, and Solomon Steinheim have continued the medieval tradition, presenting divine transcendence in an idiom comprehensible to modern man.

However, the basic doubt affecting divine transcendence in Judaism remains. This doubt has two causes: First, is the Jews’ continuing to honor as divine revelation a scripture which is open to the foregoing critique. Second, is their doctrine of election that is biological and, by denying the relevance of religion and morality, downright unethical and indeed racist. The adherents of Reform Judaism have for the most part abandoned the view of verbatim revelation of any part of scripture. Acknowledging the validity of Biblical criticism, they maintain that the Old Testament is the record of humans’ views about reality which have significance for Jews in a more intimate way than the exhortations or reports of other wise humans in history. Being human and historical, the texts of Torah, Psalms and Prophets do not escape the relativities of history and must be taken as such. This did not convince Reformed Jews that immoral election must be equally subject to historical relativity and is unworthy of modern



Jews. Indeed, their rejection of the divine status of the scripture was the corollary of their doubt of the super-natural and transformation of Judaism into an ethno-cultural identity. This ethnocentrism leaves a back door open for relating to a societal archetype who is taken to be the "god" or "father" of the ethnic entity. This explains the continuing use of harsh, questioning and critical, even disrespectful language in addressing oneself to God. The rabbis of old had done it; and yet none had dared use the chastizing language of Eli Wiesel's conversations with God. Shockingly tragic, the Holocaust of Hitler certainly was. But no tragedy whatever justifies the kind of criticism Wiesel and his colleagues today address to God. That God is dead, that He abandoned His creation to Satan, that He lost His divine concern and providence cannot be said by the person who believes God to be God. At any rate, condemnation of the tragic event in no way implies its denial as a decree of God which must be acknowledged as such.

In fact, Isaiah's contribution was the identification of Jahweh with Babylon's mighty Lord of heaven and earth, who says of Himself: "I am the Lord; and there is none else, there is no god beside me" (Isaiah 45:5-6, 14, 18; 46:9; 47:12). Such "growth" of Hebrew divinity united the best in Babylonian and Persian transcendentalism with the Hebrew notion of divinity. However, Isaiah's god remained bound hand and foot to "his people" as before; and he now hurled his new powers against their enemies. If he protected and strengthened some *goyim* in the process, this was only to the end of utilizing them as puppets in the service of the only purpose he ever knew: the welfare of his own people. Isaiah's built-in ethnocentrism denied him the possibility to rise to the ethical consequences of transcendentalism. Instead of being the Prophet of Jewish transcendentalism, Isaiah accommodated the ethnocentrist god to the demands of transcendentalism required by the new age and situation. His work prevented the complete triumph of transcendentalism among the Hebrews and denied the thorough acculturation to which the exile had exposed them. The ethical enthusiasm of Mesopotamia which caused the earthly counterpart of the cosmic state to be without frontiers and thus to envelope mankind, was incomprehensible. "All men in the four regions of the earth" are citizens endowed with the same rights and duties *vis-à-vis* "the Lord of the land." "the first-being of all the lands"<sup>8</sup> Such thoughts must have remained utterly opaque to Isaiah.

### C. The Christians

The early history of Christian doctrine reveals three distinct sources of influence: Judaism, Hellenism and the mystery religions.



1) The Jewish Source.—Jesus was born a Jew and his first followers were Jews. He and they accepted the Jewish holy writings as scripture, and identified with the religious tradition of the Jews. Certainly, Jesus taught two doctrines novel to the Judaism which prevailed at his time: universalism and internalism. The first, Jesus opposed to ethnocentrism which, he thought, had corrupted the bone and marrow of the religion of God. To his mixed audience of Jews and *goyim*, Jesus said: "All ye are brethren . . . Call no *man* your father upon the earth; for one is your father which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters; for one is your master" (Matthew 23:9–10). There is to be no discrimination between man and man, certainly not between Jews and *goyim* on account of the Jews' descendance from Abraham. Jesus not only rejected the idea that the Jews are the children of God, but that the descendance bond counted at all. The suggestion that Jesus' own relatives were entitled to any priority over other humans even when everyday matters were concerned, angered Jesus and elicited the following reply: "Who is my mother and my brethren? Behold my mother and my brethren? For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother and my sister, and mother" (Matthew 12:48–50; Mark 3:33–35). "God is able of these stones to raise children unto Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). God, he maintained, is good to all indiscriminately (Matthew 5:44–45); and this new message is to be conveyed to "all the nations" (Matthew 28:19), for all of them are equally deserving of the new revelation. Jewish ethnocentrism was seen by Jesus as "shut [ting] up the kingdom of heaven against men." Together with the Jews' custom of calling themselves the children of God, and God "their father," he found odious and intolerable. Not only God was not their father, but that their father was the devil whose lusts they "will do" (John 8:44, 47). In fact the Jews, especially their leaders—the scribes and Pharisees—interpreters and guardians of their religious tradition, stood so condemned in Jesus' eyes that he counselled his followers: "I say unto you, except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). The first prerequisite of divine transcendence, namely, universalism, was affirmed by Jesus in direct opposition to Jewish ethnocentrism.<sup>9</sup>

Since Jesus inherited his idea of God from the Jewish tradition which he regarded as normative but needy of correction, it is reasonable to assume that for Jesus, there was but one God Who is the God of all men. "None is good save one, that is God," he said (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Indeed, Jesus cleansed the Godhead of any association with the Jews other than that He is their Creator, as well as



the Creator of all other men. This was a great reform which Jesus introduced, calling the Jews back to the (Mesopotamian) tradition of the *hanifs*, to Semitic monotheism at its best, or the affirmation of one God as absolute, transcendent Creator and Lord of the world. It stands to reason that Jesus would care for his reform and that he would dispel any attempt at lessening or confusing the transcendence of God. Against such reasonable precaution, the evangelists ascribed to Jesus meanings contradicting divine transcendence. Although such ascription reflected the ideas of the ascriber-evangelist, not of Jesus, Christian theologians later referred to these ideas as proofs of the doctrine of the trinity.

It is alleged that Jesus called, or permitted himself to be called "the son of man," the "son of God," the "Christ" and "Lord." This, supposedly, constitutes evidence that Jesus regarded himself worthy of worship, a second person of the trinity. "Son of man" or *bar-nash/bar-Adam*, never meant in Jesus' Aramaic world any more than a well-bred, noble man, or simply a human creature. This meaning of the expression is still held today in Hebrew, Aramaic as well as Arabic. In Old Testament, the term was used in Book of Daniel (7:9 – 14) and the similitudes of Enoch (37:71) in the same way, meaning moral excellence. Even in the synoptic gospels, the term does not seem to mean anything else. The very attribution of the term by the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus to all Jews precludes *a fortiori* any understanding of it as meaning something metaphysically different from man. Indeed, in the Gospel of Mark, since Jesus was not called by that appellation except after baptism, and hence after his decision to dedicate his life to God's service, the term must have meant the same to Mark.<sup>10</sup> It is only in John's Gospel and Paul's Epistles that "sonship" becomes something mysterious and metaphysical.<sup>11</sup> This fact bears evidence of the foreign Greek source of the new meaning imposed upon the Hebrew/Aramaic word. At any rate, Jesus called himself "son of man," never "son of God." In John's Gospel, even that concept, namely, "the son of God," suffered another transformation as radical as the first. It became "the only begotten son of God" (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18).

The term *Christos*, or anointed, meant the king or priest expected to rehabilitate the Jews and rebuild their Davidic kingdom. Though as man he is the agent or instrument of God's intervention into the processes of history, the *Christos* is through and through man. Otherwise, Isaiah would have never attributed the title to Cyrus whom nobody, not even his own subjects, mistook for anything else but human.

In time, as the Isaiahan hope for rehabilitation was frustrated and the returnees failed to rebuild the Davidic kingdom, the Zoroastrian influence of eschatological messianism began to inject into the term an eschatological and hence mysterious reference. The messiah became a human of any age yet to come but still all too human. No wonder that to Jesus, such appellation was presumptuous. He not only never accepted it but counselled his disciples against its use (Matthew 16:20).

A third argument the later deifiers of Jesus bring is derived from his statement, "I and my father are one" (John 11:30). That this statement is found only in John casts suspicion upon its source. At any rate, assuming its authenticity, what could have Jesus meant by it? Jesus had defined sonship of God as conformance with His will, as obedience to His commandments. "Whosoever shall do the will of God," he held, the same is my brother, and my sister, and my mother (Matthew 12:48-50; Mark 3:33-35). Consequently, unity with God must be a spiritual communion whose only base is righteousness or virtue, doing God's will. Certainly there is a sense in which a lower can say "I and my beloved are one" without any implication of ontological unity, of loss of personality or fusion of individuality. To love or obey a person thoroughly, or to follow his directives, so as to make one's will totally harmonious with his, is indeed possible, nay frequent in human experience everywhere. The same is true of the teacher-pupil, and generally of any master-disciple relationship. Here knowledge of one person by the other can reach such degree of completeness as to warrant the claim of unity. Since the Jews had accused Jesus of violating the commandments of the Father, it was natural for him to defend himself by insisting that there is no discrepancy between him and God, that is to say, between what he says or does, and what God wishes or commands him to say or do. To understand such unity ontologically is to mistake a spiritual meaning for the literal, to perceive a material percept in place of a poetical — in short, it constitutes evidence that the poetical imagination of the listener has not been at work.

The same misunderstanding is characteristic of the Christians' use of the terms *Kurie*, *O Kurios*, *Mar*, *Mari*, *Maran*. These terms mean master or lord, and they are attached to the demonstrative "the" or the possessive pronoun "my," or "our." Whether used by Jesus in reference to himself, or by his hearers, the term expresses his relation to a messenger sent by him whose commission is to perform the will of the sender. In this sense, any messenger-sender is a *Kurios* or master. Such is the case in Matthew 21:3 and Mark 11:3, when Jesus sent a



disciple into a village to bring forth a colt. In all other cases, where the term is used by Jesus' disciples, it is a vocative which implies respect and honor but not divinity, since it can be and is usually applied to any honored man. If Paul and other men with Hellenized minds misunderstood the term as meaning God, the fact tells about him, not about Jesus. If, on this basis, Christianity holds that "the cult of the Lord Jesus was inherent in Christianity from the beginning" and that "the eventual formulation of an explicit doctrine of our Lord's deity as the incarnate Son of God was necessitated by the fact that it provided the only ultimate intellectual justification of such a cultus,"<sup>12</sup> the assumption is that what some disciples thought of Jesus rightly or erroneously is constitute of Christianity and that it is *ipso facto* truthful of Jesus.

Another flagrant mistaking of the material for the spiritual, and hence of the literal for the poetical, is the argument between the Sanhedrin and Jesus. Anxious to prove him guilty, the Sanhedrin summoned a witness to testify that Jesus claimed he could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Certainly, Jesus could perform this feat in the spiritual sense, just as the statement said, "I will build another [temple] made without hands."<sup>13</sup> Obviously, there is nothing blasphemous in such a statement, if the "temple" is taken to mean man's relation of worship, adoration, obedience and service to God.

We may conclude from this discussion that Judaism was not a source working against divine transcendence as far as Christianity was concerned. The areas where Judaism itself compromised transcendence — namely, "Elohim" as a class of divine beings intermarrying with men, exclusivist ethnocentrism, and racist election — did not affect Christian thinking which developed in a direction opposite to that of Judaism. The Jewish tradition merely furnished the terms which Christianity used but not before transforming their Jewish meaning and investing them with new, non-Jewish signification.

## 2) The Gnostic Source:—

For three centuries before Jesus, Palestine and the whole Near Eastern world was flooded by Hellenism, an ideology and worldview deriving from the older roots of Egyptian religion as well as the reaction of the provinces against Greek and Roman naturalism. It crystallized in the hands of Plotinus and it exercised a tremendous influence upon the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean among whom Christianity was born.

The central thesis of gnosticism, common to all the schools to which it gave rise, is that the essence of all that is, is spirit; that out of



spirit it all came to be; to spirit it tends and will eventually return, matter and individuation being an aberration and evil; that at the center of all being is an absolute spirit which is absolute and eternal. Gnosticism agrees with pantheism and is often at the base of any cosmology affirming the unity of all being. But the deity or absolute it affirms is the opposite of anything empirical, relative, or personal. It is this that gave gnosticism its adaptability to Judaism, Christianity and to Islam, as well as to the other religions of antiquity prevalent in the Mediterranean basin. It is responsible for the widespread simile of spirit to light and the association of the two in all that pertains to the divine and heavenly category.

As a source of Christian theology, gnosticism furnished the idea that God is wholly spirit, that He is the Creator of all that is *ex nihilo*, and that creation took place through emanations, the chief of which is that of the logos, the word, which is as thoroughly spiritual and divine as God. The opening verses of John's gospel<sup>14</sup> bespeak pure gnosticism; and so do those of the Nicene Creed.<sup>15</sup>

These words of the Nicene Creed were themselves the words used by the gnostics for whom Jesus was "the Word" or "first Logos" or intelligence emanated from God. Such a logos would naturally be co-eternal with God, the Absolute, since the emanation from God is the very life and activity of God and is hence co-eternal with Him. The first Intelligence is also "begotten not made" in the sense of emanated, not created like worldly things. It is spirit of the very same spirit as God, and hence both it and God are co-substantial, i.e., of one substance, namely, absolute spirit or divinity. Of the Logos, it is certainly true to say that it is "Light of Light," "true God of true God," and "of one substance with the Father." Neither the ideas nor the vocabulary of gnosticism are in any way opposed to transcendence. On the contrary, the contempt in which gnosticism held matter and everything material or creaturely, and its insistence on an absolute spirit that is one and beyond all creation, make it a force working not against but for transcendence. Indeed, the whole system of emanations of the Ennead, of *logoi* coming serially one after another while keeping their common substantiality, was designed in order to solve the problem of matter and plurality (i.e., creation) proceeding out of spirit and unity (i.e., God). The nearest that gnosticism came to non-transcendence is its association of God, spirit and the *logoi* with light and the lights of heaven. But it must be borne in mind that for their earlier century, the sun was not merely a ball of hot gases, nor the moon a cold mass of black rock and dust. They were heavenly lights at which the soul of man never stopped wondering. "Light" is the



fascination of human consciousness; not the waves of energy of the physicist. By identifying Jesus with the Logos, Gnosticism sought to digest the novel Christian movement, while keeping its notion of divine transcendence intact. That is why all gnostic Christians held tenaciously to the above-mentioned part of the Nicene Creed and dispelled the historical creaturely Jesus, along with his crucifixion and whole career on earth as a "phantasm."

The Docetists' principle: "If he suffered, he was not God; if he was God, he did not suffer"<sup>16</sup> — is a perfect summary of the gnostic position *vis-a-vis* the threat to transcendence posed by the Christians. So is the famous statement of Arius: "God always, the Son always; at the same time the Father, at the same time the Son; the Son co-exists with God, unbegotten (in the sense of created); he is never-born-by begetting in the sense of emanated; neither by thought nor by any moment of time does God precede the Son; God always, Son always; the Son exists from God Himself."<sup>17</sup> Saturninus elaborated the position beautifully. Identifying the logoi also as angels, virtues or attributes of the spirit, he said: "There is one Father, utterly unknown [i.e., transcendent] who made Angels, Archangels, Virtues and Power . . . The Savior . . . is unborn incorporeal and without form . . . He was seen as a man in appearance only."<sup>18</sup> More clearly, Basilides said: "Mind [logos] was first born of the unborn Father, then Reason from Mind, from Reason Prudence, from Prudence Wisdom and Power . . . The Unborn and Unnamed Father sent his First-begotten Mind — and this is he they call Christ — for the freeing of them that believe in him from those who made the world . . . And he appeared to the nations of them as a man on the earth . . . wherefore he suffered not, but a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, was impressed to bear his cross for him; and Simon was crucified in ignorance and error, having transfigured by him that men should suppose him to be Jesus . . . If any therefore acknowledge the crucified, he is still a slave and subject to the power of them that made our bodies; but he that denies him is freed from them, and recognizes the ordering to the Unborn Father."<sup>19</sup> In fact, gnosticism was fighting desperately to save transcendence from certain ruin by dedicated forces. Who and what were these anti-transcendence forces? By nature, gnosticism was a view which appealed to the refined mind. It required an intelligence capable of grasping its abstract doctrine. Obviously, it was not a religion for the masses. Its metaphysics were too spiritual and lofty for the plebeian mind. The latter could understand and revel in the concrete, the material. If the material has a spiritual aspect to it which ennobled it and made it more respectable, all the better. But such an ideal cannot lose touch with the



material world without losing its appeal. Christian gnosticism was hence hereticated and defeated by those incapable of rising to the lofty spheres it presented. These insisted on a real, historical, concrete human Jesus Christ whom they asserted along with the divine, eternal and spiritual logos. Little did they care that the creaturely human Jesus dealt a death blow to the transcendence of the divine logos.

### 3) The Mystery-Religions Source:—

The third source of Christianity was the mystery religions of antiquity. These religions came on the heels of decaying Greek and Mesopotamian religions which in their last years were mixed with primitive Roman religion and with Manichaeism and Mithraism, respectively. Some influence from Egypt through the Isis and Osiris cults was also added to the scene, presenting a vast array of cults and views of the world.

The elements common to nearly all these cults and views were a reflection of the general deterioration of world order, of the imperial states that had hitherto controlled it. A general moral and religious skepticism dominated the atmosphere as the public scene was shot through with corruption, egotism, crass materialism and hedonism and power politics, while the masses were immersed in poverty, disease and a miserable existence as puppets of generals and demagogues. The cults divided the masses, as they catered to their basic human needs in an hour of dying civilizations. First, was the need for a god to assume the burden of one's existence which the individual could neither bear nor cope with. Such a god, it seemed to them, would fulfill his function best by undergoing an expiatory death. Only in this way could the overwhelming feeling of guilt gnawing at their soul be relieved. Second, the need for abundant life expressed in rites of fertility aimed at reassuring man of the promise of children, crops and animals. Third was the need for a general restoration of society to a past felicity which was lost in the age of decline. The eschatological projection filled the imagination with the desiderate of the deprived masses and half-satisfied their yearning for justice, for loving concern and well-being.

The cults of Osiris, Adonis and Mithras seemed best suited to answer all these needs at once. They were all sacramental, offering the worshipper personal catharsis through participation in the death of the god, effected symbolically by immolating a bull or goat, and by drinking its blood or a substitute (some juice, bread, milk, honey or wine). The participation was equally in the god's resurrection which cheered and reassured the worshipper with the good harvest in the fall, and with plentiful animal offspring and resurgent nature in the spring.



Initiation into the faith was carried out by a baptism in water, performed by the priests of the cult called "fathers." All of these sacraments passed to Christianity with such little change that, at the time Christianity contended with these cults for the souls of men, it seemed to Tertullian as if "the devil himself had inspired a parody of the Christian sacraments."

Above all, the mystery cults of the ancient world provided man with a god on which he could have a hold. The god was individuated enough to be a person, borne hierophanically by a real bull or goat or pig, physically slaughtered, and physically consumed, or symbolically by means of real substitutes, identified with the forces of nature, the dying with winter and the resurrection with spring. The sacraments, with their principle of *ex opera operata*, gave the worshipper a guaranteed result. The catharsis they caused was real and felt whenever the faith was candid and the need was itself real. The myth was not demythologized, i.e., seen as myth; but believed in literally, i.e., seen as really and concretely true. Because of the elaborate rituals (*dromena*) which often extended over several days and involved bathing, shaving, eating, sleeping, strenuous exercises, as well as orgies, the language used in connection with the rituals was capable of being taken literally as well as metaphorically. When the Mithraic votary was finally brought before the gods, he could say: "I am your fellow wanderer, your fellow star," and the Orphic: "I am the child of Earth and of the starry Heaven. I too am become god."<sup>20</sup> Apuleis<sup>21</sup> tells of his participation in the rites of Isis: "I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Porserpine's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all elements. At midnight, I saw the sun shining as if it were noon. I entered the presence of the gods of the underworld and the gods of the upperworld, stood near and worshipped them." After shaving his head, fasting and abstaining for ten days, he was "admitted to the nocturnal orgies of the great god and became his illuminate (*principalis die nocturnos orgiis in lustratus*)." Lucius then reports that "now he [i.e., the god] deigned to address me in his own person, with his own divine mouth."<sup>22</sup> In every sense, the experience was both empirical and spiritual.

This is a far cry from the transcendent unitary God of Semitic religion Whose adoration and worship is a purely spiritual exercise, carried out without sacrament, with no operative *dromena*, and whose language is immediate and direct. The language of Semitic worship may carry a metaphor or simile; but it never points to any empirical reality or thing, and allows no more place to imagery than is needed to move the poetical imagination on its flight. Naturally, the transcendence aspect of this religion had to change if the religion was to be adopted.



The mind accustomed to sacramental religious practice is ill adapted to the kind of abstraction which the worship of the transcendent God demands, And it is precisely this consciousness presupposed by these mystery religions which continued into Christianity as it travelled from the Semitic East to the Hellenistic West.<sup>23</sup> The sacraments, with the human needs to which they catered, constituted the underlying substratum: Above all, baptism or the rite of *praefatus deum veniam*, and the Eucharist, where the worshipper participates in the death and resurrection of the god. The god is wished dead and resurrected as the animal is slaughtered with the words *sic moriaris ut moritur, sic vivas ut vivit*.<sup>24</sup> The same words are then addressed to the worshipper with the pronoun now referring to the god that was just killed and resurrected signifying a genuine *natalis sacrorum* or religious rebirth for him.

The names and personalities were a facade which changed without affecting the substance of the sacraments or their underlying doctrine. The crucified Jesus stepped into the place of the immolated god, and the doctrine was given the emendations necessary for the new religious ideology. It was the ethics, not the the logical doctrine, that changed radically from over-indulgent hedonism to severe asceticism and self-renunciation. It was here that the revolution had taken place. Life-and world-affirmation became life- and world-denial. But here, in the field of the moral imperative, the question of divine transcendence was irrelevant. Indeed, what Christianity had inherited from Judaism was twisted around to suit the Hellenistic consciousness: The Hebrew scriptural descriptions of the deity, written by and for a Semitic mind, were shorn of their poetry and taken literally to support the doctrinal elements of Christianity.

Nothing is more reflective of this fact than the use Christian theologians have made of Hebrew Scripture to justify the notion of the trinity and thus establish the divinity of Jesus. The book, *De Trinitate*, gives evidence that practically every quotation St. Augustine took from Hebrew scripture in support of the trinity was misunderstood by his Hellenistic mind. As a Christian Hellene, Augustine was incapable of understanding the Semitic way of talking about God.<sup>25</sup> Augustine's way of arguing for the Trinity was not the unique literalism of an un-poetic mind. It has characterized the history of Christian theology to the present day. Before Augustine, Tertullian sought to deduce the trinity from the plural "us" of Geneses 7:26;<sup>26</sup> and sixteen centuries later, Carl Barth tells us that the plural form of that same passage is evidence that God is a trinity, that one person, the Father, consulted with the other two, the Son and the Holy Spirit and jointly decided to make man in Their/His image.<sup>27</sup> The plural pronouns used by God



(Geneses 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8, etc.) are a stumbling block for Barth's Western mind which is so literalist as to affirm maleness and femaleness in the Godhead because of Genesis' assertion in the same passage "male and female created He them" following "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him (Genesis 1:28).

Barth's thought moves from man to God and constitutes a flagrant case of anthropomorphism. "Could anything be more obvious," he argues in support of his view, "than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God signifies . . . juxtaposition and confrontation . . . of male and female, and then to go on to ask . . . in what the original and prototype of the divine existence of the Creator consists?"<sup>28</sup> It is crude, to say the least, to suggest that, granted the nature of God is trinitarian, the relationship between the divine persons of the trinity is that of "begetting" and "bearing children."<sup>29</sup>

The case is not limited to those key sentences of the Old Testament which Christians have adduced as evidence for the trinity. It extends to those of the New Testament which are ascribed to Jesus and supposed to tell his idea of himself. "I and my Father are one," "I am the way," "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," "You say so" said in response to the question, Are you the Messiah? etc. were all interpreted literally by Christians. The same words, taken in their Aramaic original which Jesus spoke, and hence under the categories of a Semitic consciousness, would not furnish the evidence the Christian seeks. All of them impress me as ordinary statements of common parlance which can be heard even today in Arabic a hundred times a day in any village market place. Nobody would take them to mean what the Christian Hellenic theologians have claimed. This observation applies to those New Testament statements pertinent to the nature of Jesus which are ascribed to the disciples, such as their addressing him as "Lord," and seeking forgiveness of their sins at his hand, etc.

Contemporary theologians, anxious to speak to moderns but still standing within the mainstream of Christian thought, continue to affirm within the mainstream of Christian thought, continue to affirm the same thesis, though in differing terms. Led by Paul Tillich, and generally affected by Immanuel Kant, they want to keep both transcendence as well as the historical (empirical, natural, human) reality of Jesus. Hence they arbitrarily assume that the transcendent God, like the "Brahman principle,"<sup>30</sup> or the "philosophical absolute,"<sup>31</sup> is forever unknown and unknowable unless He is concretized in some object of nature and history.<sup>32</sup> Tillich asserts that such "concrete element in the idea of God cannot be destroyed,"<sup>33</sup>



and that, while polytheism—as affirmation of divine concrete—will always tend towards transcendence, there can be no absolute monotheism.<sup>34</sup> Where absolute monotheism is declared, God, as absolute “monarch” over hosts of powers, angels, etc., will “always be threatened by revolution or by outside attack” like any other “absolute monarch” on earth; or, as in the case of “mystical monotheism,” where “the ultimate transcends all,” God remains an abstract = X and man’s craving for the empirical divine continues; “This most radical negation of the concrete element in the idea of God,” he writes, “is not able to suppress the quest for concreteness.”<sup>35</sup> And in order to pave the road for the apotheosis of Jesus, Tillich went on to contradict himself by asserting that logically “mystical monotheism does not exclude divine powers in which the ultimate embodies itself temporarily.”<sup>36</sup> Obviously, Tillich here has discarded the philosophical stance—and contradicted his earlier definitions of absolute monotheism. In order to accommodate dictates of Christian dogma, he allowed himself to make untenable assertions about God as well as man. For, it is not true that transcendence is incapable of suppressing the quest of the concrete, just as it is not true that chastity and purity are incapable of suppressing the desire for other women. The presence of desire for other women does not make adultery a virtue. Neither is desire always and necessarily present. Paul Tillich has here followed the Hindu illuminati who tolerated the crudest paganism and polytheism “for the masses of the people who are unable to grasp the ultimate in its purity and abstraction from everything concrete, [as] history . . . in India and in Europe has shown.”<sup>37</sup>

Having decided, therefore, like Tertullian, Irenaeus and Augustine, that Christianity must have both the transcendent God it inherited from Judaism and Hellenism, and the concrete God, he had to resort to acrobatics to explain how the two can be kept in consciousness and expressed in thought. For this a new signification for myths and symbols became necessary; as they were the only tools with a sufficiently mercurial nature to accommodate the paradox.<sup>38</sup> Myth, symbols and parables, it is claimed, are “the proper language of religion . . . where God is the chief actor and where the story is symbolically true, i.e., will appear to be true [if the standpoint is that of] the religion to which one subscribes.”<sup>39</sup> God, it is claimed, is immanently present in myths and symbols, as their meaning on a secondary level. But that is not merely an ideational referent which the mythical terms signify. It is ontological. “Jesus,” the “Word of God,” is not merely an attribute of the transcendent God signifying love and mercy and concern; for “when the Word becomes flesh, myth becomes history.”<sup>40</sup>



Evidently, Christian thought has not yet outgrown its linkage to the mystery religions. What it digested of Judaism is a historical figurization, a context, as historians of religions would say. What it digested Hellenism is a cosmetic superstructure which gives it pomp and circumstance. In its rock-bottom essence, the core of its religious content, it remains true to the mystery religions with their immanent god dispensing his man of holiness and salvation through the catharsis which participation in the sacrament brings. Here, transcendence is a decorative notion, inexpressed and inexpressible except when it assumes the modality of the concrete. Here, Miles had said, the proper religious expression is "silence qualified by parables" and myths.<sup>41</sup> Here, finally, the myth is false—taken literally, ideationally true—taken figurative, and inspiracally true—taken as symbol of the immanent God present therein—a treble-tiered paradox!!!

Since this was the state of "God's transcendence" in Christianity, the language expressing it was equally improper. Although Christians never ceased to claim that God is transcendent, they spoke of Him as a real man who walked on earth and did all things men do including the suffering of the agonies of death. Of course, according to them, Jesus was both man and God. They never took a consistent position on Jesus' humanity or divinity without accusation of apostasy and heresy. That is why their language is always confusing, at best. When pinned down, every Christian will have to admit that his God is both transcendent and immanent. But his claim of transcendent is *ipso facto* devoid of grounds. To maintain the contrary, one has to give up the laws of logic. But Christianity was prepared to go to this length too. It raised "paradox" above self-evident truth and vested it with the status of an epistemological principle. Under such principle, anything can be asserted and discussion becomes idle. Finally, the Christian may not claim that the Trinity is a way of talking about God; because, if the Trinity discloses the nature of God better than unity, a greater plurality would do the job better. At any rate, to reduce the "Holy Trinity" to a status of *in percipi* is heretical as it denies *una substantia* as metaphysical doctrine.

### III. Divine Transcendence in Islām

#### A. The Human Capacity to Understand

The first point to bear in mind is that Islām does not tolerate any discrimination between humans as far as their capacity to understand the transcendence of God is concerned. Divine transcendence is everybody's business; and in Islām it is the ultimate base of all religion, and all anthropology. Unlike the Hindus and Paul Tillich who, by their



reserving of transcendence to the intelligentsia, open the road wide for polytheism and pagan practices, Islām holds all humans naturally—and hence necessarily—endowed with a *fiṭrah*, i.e., an innate *sensus communis*, by which to understand that God is, that He is One, and that He is transcendent. “Hold fast, therefore, to *the true religion* like a *ḥanīf*, which is the natural endowment with which all humans have been endowed. In this respect, there is no variety in God’s creation of humans. That is the worthy religion” (Qur’ān 30:30).

There is no excuse for denying transcendence or compromising it. Two avenues have been provided for mankind by God through which to recognize the transcendent God. First, He in His mercy, has sent revelation to every people on earth to teach them that the transcendent God is and that they owe Him worship and service. “There is no people but We have sent them a warner . . .” (Qur’ān 35:24; 25:51) “We have sent no messenger but to clarify Our message to his people in their own tongue” (Qur’ān 14:4) and “We have sent no messenger but commanded him that none is to be worshipped except God and that evil is to be shunned” (Qur’ān 16:36).

Second, including the cases where the revelation has been corrupted beyond recognition, there is the universal road of the *sensus communis*, open to all humans. Any exercise of this faculty will, if carried out with candidness and integrity, lead to the cognition of the transcendent God. For, as the Qur’ān has put it, every human is endowed with the capacity to know Allah. That is his birthright. To explain and clarify the point in detail, Islāmic thinkers invented the story of Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān (Living, Son of the Awake) who grew up in a deserted island devoid of humans and hence of tradition, and who gradually led himself by sheer intellectual effort from ignorance, to naive realism, to scientific truth and finally, to natural reason and the discovery of transcendent God.<sup>42</sup>

The *sensus communis* which Islām recognizes is different from the sense of the holy of Rudolph Otto and the historians of religions. The sense by which humans discern the holy or numinous quality of reality is certainly acknowledged. Islām, in other words, agrees with their definition of man as *homo religiosus*, but it adds to it the sense for divine transcendence and holds that without it the numinous reality recognized in religion would not be ultimate. For it may well be pluralistic as in polytheism, and/or naturalistic as in the Egyptian and mystery religions, but not ultimate. Ultimacy requires *tawḥīd*, i.e., unization and transcendence of the deity. As the Qur’ān put it: “If God had associates, they would have sought His throne. Praised and glorified be He, far beyond what they claim . . . If there were more than one



God in heaven and earth, cosmic order would have collapsed" (Qur'ān 17:42-43; 12:22). Tillich's remark is true but only where the other beings are declared divine. Where God alone is divine, and all other beings including angels, demons, spirits, humans and all else, are creatures of God, there can be no threat to His position or authority. Therefore only a transcendent God can fulfill the idea of reason we call God. The question of ultimacy cannot rest with intermediate or plural gods. Only one God can be ultimate. If he is, He must be transcendent, i.e., beyond all else. Otherwise His ultimacy cannot be maintained.

This is the first assertion of the Islāmic creed that "There is no God but God" which the Muslim understands as denial of the existence of any other Gods. It equally a denial of any associates to God in His rulership and judgeship of the universe, as well as a denial of the possibility of any creature to represent, personify or in any way express the divine Being. The Qur'ān says of God that "He is the Creator of heaven and earth Who creates by commanding the creature to be and it is . . . He is the One God, the Ultimate . . . (2:117, 163). There is no God but Him, ever-living, ever-active (3:2). May He be glorified *beyond any description!* (6:100) . . . No senses may perceive Him (6:103) . . . Praised be He, the Transcendent Who greatly transcends all claims and reports about Him" (17:43). In fulfillment of this view, the Muslims have been all too careful never to associate in any manner possible, any image or thing with the presence of the divine, or with their consciousness of the divine and in their speech and writing about the divine, never to use anything except Qur'ānic language, terms and expressions which, according to them, God had used about Himself in the Qur'ānic revelation.

Transcendence in language was maintained by Muslims around the globe despite their speaking all sorts of languages and dialects and belonging to all sorts of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This was the objective of the Qur'ānic dicta, "We [God] have revealed it in an Arabic Qur'ān (12:2; 20:113) . . . We have sent it [the revelation] down an Arabic judgment (13:39) . . . We have revealed it in the Arabic tongue (39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3) . . . ; It is We Who sent down the Qur'ān; We Who shall safeguard it; We Who shall collect it; We Who shall explain it" (75:16-18). Abiding by these dicta, Muslims treated only the Arabic original as the Qur'ān and regarded the translation as mere aids to understanding it, not as text, Liturgical use of the Qur'an could be made only in Arabic. *Ṣalāt*, the institutionalized worship, kept the form it was given by the Prophet on divine instruction. Moreover the Qur'ān gradually moulded the consciousness of the non-Arabic speaking converts and furnished the categories under which



religious matters could be thought out and religious feelings could be expressed. Any God-talk by Muslims became exclusively Qur'ān-talk, adhering scrupulously to the Arabic categories of the Qur'ān, to its Arabic terms, its Arabic literary forms and expressions.

How did the Qur'ān express transcendence? It gave 99 or more names for God expressing His lordship of the world, and His Providence in it; but it emphasized that "Nothing is like unto Him" (42:11). Anything belonging to His realm or associated with it—like His words. His time, His light, etc.—the Qur'ān described as something to which empirical categories cannot apply. "If all trees were pens and all seas were ink with which to record God's speech," it asserted, "they would be exhausted before God's speech runs out" (18:110). "A day with God is like a thousand years of man's" (22:47). "The Light of God is that of heaven and earth. Its likeness is the light of lamp whose glass is a celestial star, whose fuel is from a blessed olive tree that is neither of the East nor of the West, incandescent without fire . . ." (24:35). Thus, empirical language—figures and relations from the world—are used; but with the unmistakeable denial that they apply to God *simpliciter*.

**B. The Human Capacity to Misunderstand.**—Having asserted that humans are all endowed with the capacity to recognize the transcendent God, Islām does not assert that they all must have in fact achieved such recognition. In the terms of a ḥadīth (tradition) of the Prophet, "Every man is born a Muslim [in the sense of nature, or a *Sollensnotwendigkeit* for recognizing Allah]. But it is his parents [or nurture, tradition and culture] that Judaize or Christianize him." Departure from this primordial, innate monotheism, is the work of culture and history. Its sources are passion and culture; the former, when vested interest in it elevates it to the status of dogma, of an article beyond contention; the latter, when the student disciple or seeker's nerve fails in the *épôché* requisite for grasping a truth not under the categories of his own culture. The first is evidenced by the reply of Heraclius to the Prophet's emissary who called him to Islām.<sup>43</sup> The second, in the problems early Islāmic thought had contended with relating to the divine attributes.

Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians have entered Islām in its early days and brought with them the mental categories of their inherited cultures. The majority did not speak Arabic. Naturally, their minds, accustomed to think in terms of divine immanence, particularism and concreteness, could not readily absorb the radical idea of divine transcendence. They understood Allah in the only way they were accustomed to, i.e., anthropomorphically. They were called



*Mushabbihah*.<sup>44</sup> They took the Qur'ānic descriptions of God literally, and fell into the unanswerable abyss of questions regarding divine nature. If as the Qur'ān says, God spoke to the Prophets and angels, then He must have a mouth and tongue! And if He sees and hears, He must have eyes and ears! And if He sat on the throne, or descended from it, then He must have a body and a posture. Al Shahrīstānī (died 548 A.H./1153 C.E.) following al Ash'ari (d. 322 A.H./935 A.C.), tells us that the *Mushabbihah* (anthropomorphists) namely, Mudar, Kuhmus, Aḥmad al Hujaymī, Hishām ibn al Ḥakam, Muḥammad ibn 'Isā, Dawud al Jawāribī and their followers held that God could be interviewed and embraced; that He visits people and is visited by them; that He has organs like and unlike those of humans; that He has hair, etc. They even falsely ascribed to the Prophet sayings confirming their claims. Al Shahrīstānī took care to inform his readers that most of these claims were adopted from the teachings of Jews –Qara'ites—and singled out ḥadīths pertinent to the creation of Adam in God's image, to God's regret for the Deluge, His development of an eye-ache of which He was relieved by the angels, etc.

The Mu'tazilah were the first to rise to the threat this anthropomorphism posed for Islām. In their enthusiasm, they shot at and beyond the target at the same time. The divine attributes, they said, were of the nature of literary similes which must be interpreted allegorically and their abstract meaning extracted. That God spoke is an allegorical way of saying that revelation has been conveyed to man; that He sees and hears means that He has knowledge; that He sits on the throne means that he has power; etc. This was sufficient to refute anthropomorphism and cut it out from the Islāmic tradition once and for all, but it created the danger of *ta'ṭīl*, i.e., of neutralizing the attributes or "stopping their functioning as attributes."<sup>45</sup>

Allegorical interpretation is based on the principle that words have a double meaning: one that is conventionally agreed upon as signifying a thing, quality, event or state with which the audience is traditionally and universally familiar; and another that is not conventionally known or found in the lexicography of the language, but is assigned to it by the author. By so doing, the author creates a novel meaning and makes the word in question its carrier. This additional charge may be quite different from the conventional one. Indeed, it may even be its opposite. It is always factitive, inseparable from the context in which it is made, and comprehensible only to its author or to the person initiated into it. Speaking, writing or interpreting allegorically is extremely dangerous because, by definition, it has no rules. Once the words of language are shaken loose from the



meanings to which lexicography has attached to them, nothing can stop anybody from investing them with any other meanings. *Eisegesis*, or the reading of meanings into words not lexicographically associated with them, ruins any text it attacks. It transvaluates its values, transforms its categories, and transfigures its meanings. Greek religion and civilization came to an end when the lexicographic meanings of the words of Homer were knocked out in favor of allegorical interpretation. Ideological chaos broke out and a process of general skepticism became impossible to avert. The same was true of Hebrew scripture when Philo of Alexandria imposed upon the text a whole new layer of meanings by the same method, forcing the rabbis to cling to the letter with strongest conservatism in order to save the faith from total ruin, and opening the gates for the Jews to grow out of their faith with good conscience. Philo's eisegetical interpretation was the very process which helped graft the new Christianist ideology onto the stump of Judaism and its scripture. The Qur'ān and especially the Islāmic doctrine of God were open to the same dangers, and had to be safeguarded. In another dimension, allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ānic attributes of God created the possibility of an abstraction process which, as in the case of Hinduism and what Tillich called "mystical monotheism," cannot be stopped until it reaches the = X, or the Absolute Void of the philosophers, and there rests in silence. Such = X can never satisfy the demand of religious consciousness for a transcendent, active, living, personal and purposive God.

Hence, Mu'tazilah doctrine was only an intermediate step in the development of Islāmic thought, and al Ash'arī rose to the task of bringing their interlude to a close. He began his career as one of their members but soon realized the dangers of their position, left their ranks and countered their claims. The divine attributes, he said, are true as they stand in the Qur'ān, because they are the word of God about Himself, thus countering *ta'tīl* with the common sense meanings of the Qur'ānic terms and the faith that these words are from God. This need not lead to anthropomorphism automatically. Al Ash'arī's analysis showed that anthropomorphism derived not from the affirmation of the common sense meanings of the Qur'ānic terms, but from the attempt to give empirical answers to questions seeking "to explain how the attributes qualify God." Hence, he reasoned, if this question pertaining to the "how of predication or attribution were avoided, anthropomorphism would be ruled out. Hence the breakthrough is to declare the question "how" addressed to the divine attributes uncritical and illegitimate. "The divine attributes," he argued, "are neither He nor not-He." "Neither He" negates anthropomorphism;



and "nor not-He" negates *tai'tīl*.

*Tashbith* (anthropomorphism) is false; and so is *tai'tīl* (neutralization of the attributes through allegorical interpretation of them). The former is contradictory to transcendence; the latter, to the fact of the Qur'ān's predication of the attributes to God, which is tantamount to denying the revelation itself. The solution of the dilemma, al Ash'arī reasoned, was *first*, in accepting the revealed text as it is, i.e., as one whose meaning is anchored in the lexicography of its terms; and *second*, in rejecting the question, "How the common sense meaning is predicable to the transcendent being" as illegitimate. This process, he called "*bīlā kayfa*" (without how).

Al Ash'arī's audience understood perfectly and approved, certain that a grasp of the attribute *bīlā kayfa* was not only possible, but that it was safe from the twin dangers of anthropomorphism and allegorical interpretation. The former is inevitable if the question of the how of predication of the attribute is raised in expectation of an answer similar to that analyzing the relation of predicate to subject on the empirical world. Since the subject is transcendent, the question is invalid. Underlying this principle was the realization that the lexicographic meaning of the attribute was to be maintained but only in suggestive capacity. Affirming the divine attribute without how achieves this much. The purpose of lexicographic meaning, however, is to set the imagination on a certain course in comprehending, not to predetermine the end-object of comprehension. Lexicographic meaning gives us positive elements within the course or beam of comprehension, and it does provide walls or banks for channeling its progress so as not to be mixed up with meaning-courses other words set up. Both its inclusionary and exclusionary functions are necessary and fruitful. But once on its predetermined course, the imagination may proceed, either stopping at its end-object in nature, or continuing *ad infinitum*, under the demand of an idea of reason, in the Kantian sense of the term. The course or beam of meaning does not lead to the dark abyss, or to silence, but to something positive, though not of nature. An intuition of transcendent reality is possible precisely at the point where the imagination is "beamed" on to a course, runs on that course as far as it can until it arrives to the realization that the course is infinite and that it can sustain itself no longer. Therefore, the mind perceives the impossibility of empirical predication while the understanding is still anchored to the lexicographic meaning of the term. For the intuition of transcendent reality is an intuition of infinity gained at the very moment of consciousness when the imagination declares its own impotence to produce same. The lexicographic



meaning of the term serves as anchor while the imagination soars in search of an applicable modality of the meaning in question, a modality that is *ex hypothesi* impossible to reach. Indeed, the Qur'ān likens the word of God to a "tree whose roots are firm in the ground, but whose branches are infinite and unreachable in the skies above" (Qur'ān 14: 24).

### C. Expression of Divine Transcendence in the Visual Arts

Greco-Roman antiquity has known the principle of deification through idealization. By this process, the concrete (a human person or object of nature) was separated from its individual instance or concretization, for the purpose of intensifying its qualities. When these qualities had reached the ultimate degree possible, the object was presented as that which nature ought to have produced and wished to produce, but which it failed to produce through its stammering and one thousand and one attempts. In those attempts it may have succeeded but only partially. Art is abler than nature; in that the artist can produce that which nature has sought to produce but always failed to do so. The work of art therefore is not an imitation of nature as Plato had charged; nor is it an empirical generalization from what is given in nature. It is *a priori*, and hence transcendent or divine, inasmuch as it is the product of an idealization process carried out to the ultimate degree.

The gods of Ancient Greece were not transcendent realities, utterly and ontologically other than nature. They were the product of the same idealization process carried out by human genius. They were human, all too human, desiring, faltering, hating, loving, plotting and counter-plotting against one another, representing every facet of the human personality, every force of nature, of which they were the ultimate idealization. When the sculptor represented them in marble, or the poet in dramatic self-disclosure, any person who understood the stammering language of nature would exclaim: Yes, that is just what nature meant to say! This is naturalism; and classical antiquity was the best exemplar of it. It is therefore misleading to speak of transcendence in Greco-Roman antiquity. One had better speak of immanence. Immanence requires the natural, the concrete and empirical because it is a dimension of it. It does not shun the concrete because it is an idealization of the nature; and without the natural it cannot be reached. That is also why the art of Greece and Rome is figurative; and the rendition of specific figures in art, or portraiture, is at its best.

It was in the Renaissance that Europe rediscovered the artistic legacy of antiquity and re-appropriated it after a millennium. During



those one thousand years, Christendom labored under a composite, ambiguous esthetic which combined elements of the Greek legacy with some elements of the Semitic. The result was Byzantium whose art never lost beyond that of illustration. The *forte* of Byzantine art, namely, the icon, was unnaturalistic in form (hence Semitic, following its Judaic inheritance) and naturalistic in content by virtue of the discursive ideas it expressed in the figures or directly in the catchwords or titles assigned to the figures by the artist. This Semitic element was tossed out by the Renaissance artists who produced images of Jesus, Mary, the Father and the saints conveying the Christian meanings assigned to them, directly through the figures themselves, in the style of Ancient Greece.

Although the authorities of Christianity first condemned this naturalism as return to paganism, they were won by and finally reconciled to it by virtue of the connection of divinity with nature implicit in the incarnation. Since then, Christendom's art has been in the main figurative and idealizational. Obviously, this was found satisfactory because transcendence in the Christian mind never made demands which figurative art could not meet.

It was otherwise with the Muslim mind which asserted an absolute transcendence of the Godhead. This could be reconciled in any way with permissive immanence which tolerated expression of the divine in figures because God was not "other" than the natural, but its ultimate yea and idealization. The ultimate reality with which the Muslim is preoccupied, by which he is obsessed, whose will he is always seeking to discover, whose command he is always striving to obey, and whose mention is on his lips morning to evening with almost every sentence, is a transcendent reality whose essence and definition is that it is other than the whole of creation. Standing on creation's other side, such "totally other" is unrepresentable by anything in creation. Rather than give up for this very reason the whole attempt of aesthetics as the Jews have done, claiming that divine transcendence leaves no room for the visual arts, the Muslim artist accepted the visual arts and assigned to them the first task of proclaiming that nature is not an artistic medium.

Both stylization and idealization transform the natural and the concrete. But whereas idealization transforms so as to make the thing more natural, more representative of its genus, stylization transforms so as to deny the concrete as well as its genus. Stylization transforms nature in such a way as to negate its naturalness. The stylized figure only suggests that of which it is the figure. The figure has been emptied of its content and remains a shell whose use is to express the negation.



The same is true of human and animal figures, of the vine, leaf and flower throughout the arts of Islām. Their stylization is the Muslim artist's way of saying No! to nature, to its concrete instance as well as to its ideal form. That nothing in nature is suitable vehicle or medium for artistic expression, which is the evident purpose of all figurative Islāmic art, is tantamount to the first portion of the confession of faith, namely, There is no God but God. Just as Islāmic theology has told us that nothing, absolutely nothing in nature is God, or in any way divine— all creation being creation and hence profane, so the Muslim artist, in his aesthetic profession, is telling us that nothing in nature may be an expression of divinity.

The more the Muslim artist indulged in stylization, the more it dawned on him that God's transcendence demanded more than stylization if it is to be successfully expressed in aesthetics. He discovered that the totality of nature may be denied *en bloc* if he abandoned the stylization of natural objects and reverted to the figures of geometry. These are the very opposite of nature as given to sense. Indeed they stand at the logical conclusion of the stylization process where stylization of the vine, stalk, leaf and flower reaches its ultimate end. To establish the geometrical figures as sole medium of the visual arts is a decision perfectly in accord with *Lā ilaha illā Allah*. There is in the whole of creation nothing that is Allah, or partakes of Allah or is in any way associated with Allah.

As transcendent Being, Allah is never given to sense, and can therefore never become object of a sensory intuition. To the artist whose business it is to present a sensory intuition of the subject, God is an absolutely hopeless case. The Muslim conscience shudders at the very suggestion of a sensory representation of God. In this very despair of the Muslim artist the breakthrough. Granted Allah's transcendence removes Him from aesthetic representation and expression, is the same true of His unrepresentableness, of His aesthetic inexpressibility? The answer is negative. God is indeed inexpressible, but His inexpressibility is not. This inexpressibility became the object of aesthetic expression and the unconscious object of the Muslim artist. Stylization and its ultimate, the geometrical figure, constituted the media, the expression of God's inexpressibility constituted the goal. There remained for the Muslim artistic genius to create the design which when applied to the medium would achieve the goal.

This was accomplished before the end of the first Islamic century, when the craftsmen were still for the most part either Christians or converts from Christianity, still committed to the art form of Byzantium. In the Umayyad palaces of Jordan, in the Dome of the Rock



in Jerusalem, and the Umawi Mosque of Damascus, which date from the second half of the first Hijrī century, there is ample evidence to show that the craftsmen were Byzantine in their craftsmanship but Islāmic in some of their work. Either they, or their *maître de travail*, must have been moved by religio-esthetic considerations other than those which moved Byzantium.

Byzantine and Roman provincial art had known both stylization and the geometrical figure. But their design was devoid of momentum. It was static. The Muslim artist developed a design in which the beholder felt compelled to move from one flower, stalk or figure to another, because the second was in process of formation (i.e., of being beheld) at the very time that the segments of the first were being brought into consciousness. In other words, the design was such that it was impossible to hold one figure in perception without including a part of the next, and to hold the full figure of the second without including a part of the third, and so forth. This gave the vision an *élan* or momentum to move ever forward away from the point at which the sight originally fell. Repetition and symmetry were then discovered to reinforce this momentum by enabling it to dispense itself in all directions. The fractional figure necessitated by the shortage of material space provided an impetus for the imagination to recreate the missing fractions beyond the material *objet d'art*. The combination of stylization, non-development, non-organicness, fractions entiring the imagination to produce their complements, symmetry and momentum generating repetition—all compelled the imagination of the attentive spectator to reproduce more and more figures at the same rhythm *ad infinitum*. The non-developmental, non-organic nature of the figures dictated that the production of the design in the imagination be infinite since there is not point at which it can logically terminate. The *objet d'art* thus became a field of vision arbitrarily cut out by its material boundaries from an infinite field; and, like the field of vision of a microscope, gave a percept of the infinite realm beyond it.

The realm beyond and the continuation of the pattern in it are an idea of reason pressing upon the imagination to produce it for consciousness. Certainly, under the impact of the given in the field of vision and the momentum it has generated, the imagination ably fulfills the command and begins production. If strong, that imagination will sustain itself for consideration time and in considerable space. But by nature it cannot fulfill what is expected of it, namely, the infinite continuation. Sooner or later, therefore, it must realize that its task is impossible, that its effort is hopeless. For the infinite is that which can never become object of a sensory intuition—even in the



imagination. At this point, the effort of the imagination collapses and consciousness gains through the collapse an intuition of the cause of the collapse, of the impossibility of fulfilling the objective of the effort. Such intuition is an intuition of infinity, and infinity is the essential constituent of transcendence.

The *objet d'art* in Islām is esthetically, i.e., from the standpoint of beauty, the design it carries. The design has been called "Arabesque." It is the design as well as the esthetic principles on which the design is built. For arabesque is not only a decoration on a planar surface, but the principle embodied in any Islāmicized surface. in the facade of an Islāmic building, in its floor plan, in the design and color of a carpet, the illuminated page of a manuscript, the rhythmic and tonal arrangement of a piece of Islāmic music, the arrangement of flowering and/or floriated plants in a garden, of the rising and cascading fountains of aquaculture. The arabesque is called "decoration" by the orientalist art historians. As such, it is regarded as a hedonic flash of color, a monotonous repetition, an empty design to fill surface, or finally, a compensatory technique to surmount the subconscious fear of the desert void. When these "savants" wax theological, they argue that Muslim genius spent itself fiddling with arabesque decoration because Islām prohibited the reproduction of figures. They have neither time nor energy to ask why did Islām prohibit figurative representation. In fact, the arabesque is no decoration at all. It is not accidental to the *objet d'art*, but its essence and core. Indeed, to cover any object with arabesque is to trans-substantiate it. So much so that the art of the Arabesque, of so called, "decoration," is in truth the art of trans-substantiation. Under the influence of arabesque, the *objet d'art* loses its materiality, its concreteness, its opaqueness, its individuality, the frontiers of its very being and real-existence, even if it were the heaviest, biggest and most solid building. It becomes an airlight, transparent, flying screen of design and rhythm, that serves as a launching pad or runway on which the imagination takes off on its flight— a flight which ends in catastrophe for the imagination but the greatest and deepest sensing of the transcendent possible for man.

**D. The Expression of Transcendence in Belles-Lettres.**—The question may now be asked, whence did the Muslim obtain direction for such a great breakthrough in the expression of transcendent reality? Was this development of theirs in the visual arts a pure accident of genius? How did the discovery of the arabesque accord with the values of Islām in other realms? If the arabesque became the dominant principle of textile, metal, glass, leather and woodwork, of architecture,



horticulture and aquaculture, of manuscript illustration and illumination, even of music and chanting, surely its roots must run far deeper into the tradition than its discovery in the visual arts has suggested. Where are these roots and what is their source?

All these questions find their ultimate answer in the phenomenon of the Qur'ān, the revelation which rested the whole of its claim to divine origin on its absolute realization of the literary sublime. Conscious of its sublime quality, the Qur'ān challenged its audience to produce a match for it (Qur'an 10:38; 28:49); conscious of the impotence of its audience to do so, it lowered the challenge to ten surahs or chapters (Qur'ān 11:13), then to one chapter (Qur'ān 2:23), then to a few verses (Qur'ān 52:33). Towering proudly high above them it taunted them further by declaring their impotence even if mankind and jinn were to mobilize themselves for the task in one solid row (Qur'ān 17:88). Islām enemies commissioned the ablest among them to rise to the challenge, but they were the first to denounce the contenders as failures when they presented their production for judgment.

Long before the Prophet, the Arabs had already perfected the literary art and achieved their greatest distinctions in it. Their ability to produce works of great literary merit was tested, and the esteem they accorded to such great works was without parallel in any other culture. History knows of no other people with whom the word and its beauty had equal importance. To the Arabs, the word was matter of life and death, of oblivion and eternity, of war and peace, of virtue and vice, of nobility and vulgarity.

"*I'jāz*" is the name given to the phenomenon of the Qur'ān's challenge to all men at all times, but especially to the Arab contemporaries of the Prophet, to produce a work matching it in beauty and excellence. It contains two elements: The first is the innate character of the Qur'ān which, when perceived by the mind capable of perceiving it, produces the feeling of fascination, of being moved, of experiencing the highest and most intense values, in short, of encountering ultimate reality with all the experience attendant upon such encounter. The second is the realization of the difference that separates man, the perceiver, from God, the perceived, an index of which is man's incapacity to produce anything like the Qur'ān. The former is innate to the Qur'ān; the latter, to man. The Arabs refer to the second simply as *i'jāz*, the phenomenon or event of miraculousness; but refer to the first as *wujuh al i'jāz* or aspects of miraculousness of the Qur'ān.

That *i'jāz*, as event, has taken place among the believing and non-



believing Arabs during the life of Muḥammad, as well as among the Muslims of all ages, is an undeniable fact of history. The Qur'ān's challenge to the unbelievers and their failure to meet the challenge has been recorded in the Qur'ān with relish (*taqrī'*). *I'jāz*, however, is not only an event of history. The Qur'ān's challenge is timeless and so is its success. The proof of this is the Qur'ān continuing power to convert men to Islam, to convince them immediately of its divine origin. No man who reads what the Muslims wrote concerning their experience with the Qur'ān, or who observes the Qur'ān's effects upon their consciousness, their lives and thoughts can avoid the conclusion that the Qur'ān has such character.

The Qur'ān alone was regarded by the Arabs as worthy enough to be divine. Theirs was connoisseur judgment—accepted by the learned, friend or foe alone—which was passed on the Qur'ānic quality deeming it worthy of the transcendent God and expressing His will. Unlike the earlier prophets, whose prophethood and revelations were established through breaches of the laws of nature—i.e., by overwhelming the epistemic powers of human consciousness—the Qur'ān presented its “miracle” to those very powers capable of grasping it, and invited them to consider and acknowledge its mireculousness, or divine origin, deliberately. Its appeal was to the faculty or intellection. Whereas the other revelations “coerced” consciousness with their breaches of natural law, the Qur'ān convinced by its fulfillment of the highest expectations of the intellect. That is why the Qur'ān miraculousness became subject of the deepest and most extensive study and analysis. A physical miracle such as Moses or Jesus brought simply overwhelmed its spectators. Such miracle was by nature beyond understanding, and beyond discussion.

Evidently, there must be to the Qur'ān one or more constitutive qualities which, if perceived by the capable are indicative of transcendence. Muslims set themselves to the task of identifying and analyzing these qualities.

The first element is the non-developmental nature of Qur'ānic prose. This is the quality which baffles all Western readers, for the Qur'ān has neither beginning nor end. The arrangement of its sūrahs or chapters is neither chronological, nor systematic. When a Muslim wishes to recite the Qur'ān, he reads *mā tayassara*, i.e., that part of the text which “easily comes his way.” He may begin reading with any verse he wishes, and he may stop at any other verse. Whatever his choice, the recitation is always perfect. Whether the reader is Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu or Buddhist, atheist or agnostic, if he is a man of knowledge in Arabic, the recitation is always sublime. The beginning



is always as sweet and perfect as the middle or the end. This non-developmental character makes of the Qur'ānic text a field of vision which God cut out from His infinite will. To know it is to perceive it as such, i.e., as vehicle for reaching the infinite realm of which it is the expression. For only the supernatural, or divine, is as good in any or every part as it is in its infinite totality.

This aspect of the literary sublime in Islām, viz, non-development, is both ubiquitous and necessary. Drama, the opposite of non-development is utterly ruled out because it is, in its ideal form, the expression of polytheist concrete natural divinity. Non-development characterized Arabic poetry and prose from their origins to the present century. The best Arabic poetry is that which reads beautifully, forwards or backwards, because every one of its verses is complete, autonomous and beautiful in and by itself.

The second aspect of the Qur'ān miraculousness is momentum. It is analyzable into a literary factor and a musical factor, which work together and reinforce each other. The more one reads, the more one desires to read. Every passage recited generates within the reader and the audience a movement of his imagination to continue the recitation ad infinitum. Every passage is a launching pad or runway from which the imagination flies into the infinite space whose perception is induced by the passage in question. No creation of new verses is involved but re-creation in the imagination aided by memory of verses already recited. The same process occurs when the capable gather in *mushā'arah*, or poetry-recitation session, at which the participant recites poetry of the same meter and rhyme as the one that preceded. Sometimes, the poetry recited is classical and known to all; sometimes it is composed extemporaneously for that occasion. In either case, the recitations are so beautiful and so moving that they arouse the appreciative audience to indulge in extemporary poetical composition observing the same meter, rhyme and modalities. What is phenomenal in such events is that they are commonplace, not only among the Arabic speaking peoples, but equally among the Persian, the Urdu, Turkish and Malay speaking peoples whose poetical and esthetic consciousness has been moulded by Islām.

The third aspect is *balāghah*, or eloquence, at the apex of which comes *badi'* or the literary sublime. This aspect is a function of the beauty of composition, of the artistry of the flow, of the exact fitness of the terms, the finesse of the rendering. On one hand, the terms and phrases, the figures of speech, the percepts they evoke, and the composition of all these together into a finished sequence; and, on the other hand, the things, events or states they designate, the meanings



they convey—all these are infinite in number, variety and relation. And yet, there is one and only one rendering of them that fits *muqtaḍā al ḥal* (the reality sought). It is to the extent or degree that this ideal is achieved in a composition, that the composition is said to have actualized a measure of *balāghah*. When this measure is at its highest, the passage is recognized as *badī'*. (It is this ideal which the Qur'ān has realized in every verse. Every change of it is a change to the worse. Some rare geniuses have achieved a little measure of this superlative quality, but only in their description of one kind of reality in which their genius specialized. The Arabs have recognized Imru'ul Qays as approximating that category but only when he rides to war; al Nābighah al Dhubyanī, but only when he expresses fear; Zuhayr ibn Abī Salmā, but only when he expresses desire. The Qur'ān has fulfilled the same sublime norms in every subject it touched. Every word in the verse is a jewel; and so is every verse in the sūrah. The Qur'ān has no metal in which a few jewels are set to make jewelry. It is all jewels!

The compositional *badī'* of the Qur'ān is combined with the ideational *badī'*, i.e., the highest, noblest religious, ethical, social and personal thought, to make one indivisible unity. In the Qur'ān, the form is sublime; the content is sublime; and both form and content are interlocked with each other so that their separation is impossible without destruction of the sublime nature of the whole. In the sublime quality peculiar to it, none is available without the other. The result of their combination in the Qur'ān is irresistible fascination and terror. No literary composition in human history has ever moved so deeply, so permanently, so many generations of men and women as the Qur'ān has done. None has shattered and/or reconstructed so many lives! Even the Presbyterian H. A. R. Gibb said he felt the earth shaking under his feet as he recited the sūrah entitled "The Earthquake." The sublime in the Qur'ān is not static, but dynamic. None can resist its fascination, its terror or its intoxication.

The whole *i'jāz* claim of the Qur'ān would be idel if its power over the minds and hearts of men was dulling, dilating or hypnotizing consciousness in the sense of overwhelming it by reducing its power of perception, its noetic power. The very opposite is the case. The Qur'ān heightens consciousness and enhances it to exert the utmost perceptive, rational, intellectual, empirical, critical power of which it is capable. Its work is carried out under the full light of the sun, as it were, at mid-day, and with unsurpassable realism.

We have seen that the divine attributes are not to be interpreted allegorically; that they must be affirmed as they stand, *bilā kayfa*,



without permitting any anthropomorphism. The same applies to the Qur'ān as a whole of which the attributes are only a part. If it evokes intuition of the transcendent without anthropomorphism, and yet without allegorical interpretation, it does so by its *i'jāz* quality. The language of the Qur'ān moves by evoking poetical figures like any poetry. But unlike human poetry, the Qur'ān moves by its form and content both of which bespeak transcendence together. The former does so by the esthetic categories of non-development, momentum and *balāghah*; the latter, by conveying a content that is itself transcendent, hence infinite, absolute, *sui generis*, and moving. In its presence, man loses his ontological poise and equilibrium; for he has, if he understands it, established contact with the source of all being, of all motion, with the transcendent *tremendum et fascinosum*. The intuition of the transcendent through belles-lettres is not merely contemplative, but dynamic. For the transcendent reality the belles-lettres point to is normative, appealing, moving, commanding and prohibiting. It was under the impact of the transcendent expressed in the literary sublime that Semitic consciousness saw itself as the carrier of divine mission, as the vortex of human history, and the fulfillment of destiny.

#### E. Safeguarding Belles-Lettres Revelation from Changing Language and Culture

The total preservation of the Arabic language with all the categories of understanding imbedded therein and its continuous use by the millions to the present day, eliminated most of the hermeneutical problems confronting the modern reader of the fourteen-centuries-old revelation. The application of Qur'ānic directives to the ever-changing affairs of life will always be new; and so would the translation of its general principles into concrete prescriptive legislations speaking to contemporary tasks and problems. This, Islāmic jurisprudence has always recognized. But the meaning of the terms of revelation, the categories under which those meanings are to be understood, are certainly realizable today exactly as they were for the Prophet and his contemporaries fourteen centuries ago. The latter, not the former, is the problem of expressing transcendence. Understanding the meanings of the Qur'ān as the Prophet had understood them is the assumption of the application, or misapplication, of those meanings to contemporary problems.

The capacity of any student to understand the revelation today exactly as it was understood on the day it was revealed, is indeed a "miracle" of the history of ideas. It cannot be explained by the distinction of "disclosive" and "creative" functions of language. The former suggest an esoteric level of meaning which is disclosed to the



initiates only, and by means of eisegesis and the latter, a fabricative role whose product is not distinguishable from the constructs of pure fiction. Moreover, the "creative" function is not immune against the charges of relativism and subjectivism which render impossible any claims on behalf of Islām or any religion as such, and treats all claims as personal and dated. The interreligious dialogue offers little reward if all it can purport itself to be is a dialogue between persons, not religions.

That language changes so that it is never the same is not necessary. Arabic has not changed, though its repertory of root words has expanded a little to meet new developments. The essence of the language, which is its grammatical structure, its conjugation of verbs and nouns, its categories for relating facts and ideas, and the forms of its literary beauty—has not changed at all. The Heraclitean claim that everything changes and is never the same is a fallacy, because there must be something permanent if change is to be change at all and not the sceptic's "stream of the manifold." For more safe and accurate in the definition of language were the Muslim linguists who recognized in language one and only one function, namely, the purely descriptive. Characteristically, they defined eloquence as "descriptive precision." The terrain of lexicography thus became for them sacrosanct—"God Himself taught Adam the name of things" (2:31); and they laboriously produced for the Arabic language of the Qur'ān the most complete lexicographic dictionaries of any language. Creatively, they relegated to the human mind, where it properly belongs, as the capacity to discover and place under the full light of consciousness, aspects of reality which escape the less creative or capable, but which genius captures. The more precise the description of such apprehended reality, the more eloquent and beautiful it is, as well as the more didactic and instructive. Language—in this case Arabic—thus remained an ordered and public discipline, open to inspection, capable of accurate judgment, and compelling whoever has the requisite intelligence to say to the good author or critic, "Yes! That's just it!" It was natural that the Islāmic revelation would do all this. For without it, considering the transformations the revelations of Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha and Jesus had gone through as their original languages were lost, forgotten, or "changed," the transcendent God Himself would be a poor student of the history of religions!



## NOTES

1 H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Chap II, pp. 24–35; James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 5.

2 H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961), p. 20, 23–24.

3 Alan H. Gardiner, "Hymns to Amon from a Leiden Papyrus," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache*, XL22 (1905), p. 25, quoted in H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, pp. 26–27.

4 Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 60–72.

5 He Marduk "verily is the God, the creator of everything . . . the commands of his mouth we have exalted above the gods. . . . Verily he is the lord of all the gods of heaven and earth; the king at whose instruction the gods above and below shall be afraid . . . shall quake and tremble in their dwellings . . . Verily he is the light of the gods, the mighty prince . . . It is he who restored all the ruined gods as though they were his own creation, restored the dead gods to life" (Pritchard, pp. 69–70).

6 Martin Buber rightly claims the Hebrew spirit of separate identity is patriarchal and not, as Freud had contended, a product of the Exodus event. See his *Moses and Monotheism*, tr. K. Jones (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1939).

7 John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1960), p. 336.

8 Pritchard, pp. 57–58.

9 A number of statements attributed to Jesus by the evangelists contradict this conclusion. But it is not difficult to show that such statements run counter to Jesus' personality and must have therefore been additions made by the evangelists in satisfaction of tensions to which they or their churches were exposed. Such are the statements which declare Jesus' ministry directed to the Jews exclusively (Matthew 5:17–19; 1:6; 8:31; 15:27; Mark 5:12; 7:28; Luke 16:17, 21) and even to the lost among them (e.g., Mark 10:6; 15:24; Luke 15:4, 6); those which make Jesus' message subservient to Jewish legalism ("Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled"—Matthew 5:19; those which make Jesus subscribe to Jewish ethnocentrism such as "this day is salvation come to this house [of Zacchaeus] for in as much as he also is a son of Abraham"—Luke 19:9.)

10 F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (London, 1920), Part I, Vol. I, p. 398.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 403.



12 A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ* (London: Longman's, 1926), pp. 236–237.

13 Mark 14:58. This need not preclude the possibility of God performing another miracle—beside resurrecting the dead, healing the sick and restoring sight to the blind which Jesus performed by God's power in vindication of his prophethood—this time to rebuild the material temple in three days.

14. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God."

15 "We believe. . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things were made . . ." (Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp. 36–37.

16 Bettenson, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

17 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.v., quoted in Bettenson, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

18 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, xxiv, 1, 2, as quoted in Bettenson, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

19 Irenaeus, *op. cit.*, I. xxiv. 3–5, quoted in Bettenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.

20 Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), pp. 142–143.

21 *Metamorphoses*, xi, 19ff, quoted by M. J. Vermaseren, "Hellenistic Religions," in c. Jones Bleeker and George Widengren, *Historia Religionum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), Vol. I, p. 522–523.

22 *Ibid.*

23 See for substantiating details Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: 1907).

24 "May you die as he dies; and may you live as he lives."

25 Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man to our image and likeness" proves, for St. Augustine, that in God there is plurality, and humanness. For, he argues, unless the 'us' refers to trinity, God would have used the singular form; and, unless, the likeness of man, i.e., humanness, was in Him, He could not have created man in His likeness." (*De Trinitate*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963, Vol. 45, p. 20). In proverbs 8:24, we read: "Before the mountains were settled into place . . . I was brought forth"; and the Proverbs 8:22: "the Lord begot me, the first born of his ways." With such phrases a gnostic Semitic mind sang the eternity of wisdom allowing it to speak in the first person form. Our



author took them to refer to Jesus, whom he gnostically identified with the Word, Wisdom, or logos. But in order to justify the Christian notion of Jesus as creaturely person as well as God, he assigned to the two statements the desired disparate meanings respectively. (*De Trinitate*, p. 36). Adam's reply to God following his disobedience reported in Genesis 3:8 should also be noted: "I heard your voice, and I hid myself from your face since I am naked." This passage constitutes evidence that "God, the Father . . . appeared . . . through a changeable and visible creature subject to Himself," and hence establishes that the divine substance can be incarnated into a human (*Ibid.*, p. 71). The subjunctive form of the divine commandment "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) indicates for Augustine that there was another person whom God must have been addressing. Evidently, his mind is incapable of conceiving a creative act of God preceded by a divine pronouncement expressive of a divine wish. And since he has "established" that the interlocutor is a being with two natures, one of which is human and has a "face", he returns to Genesis 3:8 to assert that the "face" Adam was hiding from was that of Jesus Christ (*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72). The grammatical turbulence of Genesis 18 was arbitrarily interpreted by the rabbis as referring once to God and once to three angels sent by Him ("One to announce the tidings of the birth of Isaac; the second to destroy Sodom; and the third to rescue Lot. An angel is never sent on more than one errand at a time"—Midrash *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, London: Soncino Press, 1958, p. 63, note 2) is taken by Augustine as evidence for the trinity. "Since three men were seen, and no one of them is said to be greater than the others in form, or in age, or in power, why do we not believe," asks Augustine rhetorically, "that the equality of the Trinity is intimated here by the visible creature, and the one and same substance in the three persons? What does he mean by saying to them: 'No, my Lord,' and not, 'No, my Lords . . . ?'" (*Ibid.*, 75-77). Finally, Augustine performs a repulsive *tour de force* with Exodus 33:23. In answer to Moses' request that he be permitted to see God's face, God promises to cover Moses when He passes so that he may not see God, and later, to uncover him after He passes "and then you shall see my back parts . . ." The "back parts" or "*posteriora*," Augustine claims, "are commonly and not without reason understood to prefigure the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the back parts are taken to be His flesh, in which He was born of the Virgin and rose again" (*Ibid.*, pp. 84-85).

26 *Against Praxeas*, xii-xiii, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, pp. 607ff.

27 *Church Dogmatics*, tr. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrence



(London: T. and T. Clark, 1960), III, Part 1, pp. 19ff.

28 Carl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 195.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Vol I, p. 226.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, p. 226.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81; 91–92.

39 Charles P. Price, *The Principles of Christian Faith and Practice* (New Delhi: Islam and the Modern Age Society, 1977), pp. 72–73.

40 *Ibid.*

41 T. R. Miles, *Religion and the Scientific Outlook* (London: Allen and Unwin), pp. 161–164, quoted in Price, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

42 The most famous and complete version is that prepared by Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185 A. C.) in Anadalu. For a translation, see M. Mahdi and M. Lerner, *Sourcebook of Medieval Political Philosophy*.

43 Ibn Hishām reports in his *Sīrah Rasūl Allah* (Life of the Prophet of God) Heraclius's answer as follows: "Alas, I know that your master is a prophet sent by God . . . But I go in fear of my life from the Romans; but for that I would follow him . . ." tr. by Al. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 656.

44 Al Shahrastānī, *Al Milal wa al Niḥal* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al Azhar, 1370/1951), pp. 171–179.

45 Hence, their name "*al Mu'attilah*," "the neutralizers." Al Shahrastānī, pp. 61–63.



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